

How to Use the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive for Teaching at the Graduate Level: a Methodological and Theoretical Reflection

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**HOW TO USE THE SHOAH FOUNDATION'S VISUAL
HISTORY ARCHIVE FOR TEACHING AT THE GRADUATE LEVEL:
A METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL REFLECTION**

The Central European University became an access point for the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (VHA) in 2009. Anette Wieworka labeled the work done by VHA as a "historiographical revolution."¹ In this article I analyze the particular challenges this database poses to educators who wish to use this collection in their teaching. Since 2009, exercises related to this collection have been a part of my teaching of qualitative methods, gendered memory of the Holocaust, and political violence and war. In this article I will list the challenges I face when using the VHA in my teaching at a Budapest-based international graduate school. I will briefly describe the VHA, explain the exercises that are based on the VHA in my graduate courses, and finally list the challenges educators face when using this database in their teaching.

The VHA consists of 52,000 indexed and researchable interviews with various Holocaust survival groups. Available online, the interviews are chronological life story interviews. The interviewers were trained before the interview process and they were provided with similar interview guidelines. The length and the main themes of the interviews were standardized. The interviews are indexed by subject, geographical location, and names. The database can be searched by gender and language. A new feature recently added to the VHA is the IWitness program, which offers access to 1,000 interviews for editing films out of it. Users of the IWitness program can cut and paste the interview segments to suit their projects. With the addition of the IWitness program, the aim of the VHA is now complete: it seeks to make Holocaust stories accessible to a wide audience as material for academic research and as an educational tool.

As far as use of the database is concerned, we should start with the practicalities. Use of this collection for teaching purposes requires more time for class preparation than other teaching material. The instructor has to preview several interviews when preparing for a class and to connect them to the assigned readings. Collaboration with the librarian of your institution is also essential in order to reduce the work burden. At the CEU Library, Péter Berczi offers training courses for students on how to use the database and how to conduct complex searches. Andrea Szőnyi instructs students on how to use the IWitness program.

The VHA collection consists of interviews with Holocaust survivors. Therefore the most obvious way of using this database is to illustrate the interviewing process and interview technique. The students enrolled in my qualitative

1 A. Wieworka, *The Era of the Witness*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 116.

methods class need to be trained for their own interviewing projects as part of their MA or PhD thesis. Going step by step through how the VHA project was conceptualized and implemented helps them to think about their own projects. Despite the obvious differences in scale between the VHA and an MA project, there are thought-provoking similarities in terms of designing oral history projects.

In the qualitative methods class, we cover the theoretical problems of interviewing (agency, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, narrative, etc.) as well as legal and ethical issues. Students also learn how to collect and analyze interviews, to formulate questions, and to analyze the intersection of social and personal aspects. Special attention is paid to narrative life story interviews and their analysis. The students of gender studies who are taking my class are especially interested in power issues and how feminist advocacy work can benefit from interviews. One of the assignments in the class is to analyze excerpts from the VHA in reference to the theoretical, methodological and practical problems we covered in the class. (The following sample paper analyzes the concept of subjectivity.) Having introduced the archive to students, I consult with them about their chosen concept to see whether it is really feasible. Another aspect of using the collection for the class on qualitative research methods relates to the choice of questions and questioning technique. I pre-select segments as good and bad practices illustrating sensitive or insensitive interviewing practices. This shows students how questions should be formulated and illustrates the role of silence. A practical aspect of interviewing, the transcribing process, can be also be practiced by means of these interviews.

I also use the VHA in a course on gendering the memory of Holocaust. History of the Holocaust is taught either as a separate course or as a topic within the course "Gendered Memory of Political Violence and War." The MA students of history, Jewish studies and gender studies who enroll in these classes after the practical training are given an assignment that teaches them about gendered violence and the critical and thoughtful use of a range of sources of information about political violence. Two options are offered as an assignment: one is the analysis of an interview in relation to gendered memory of Holocaust; the other is the analysis of one particular experience (sexual violence, rape etc.) in various interviews. (The following sample paper analyzes one interview.) The task promotes an understanding of the importance of analyzing the mediated historical experience of the Holocaust. Students develop a critical understanding of how wars and genocides are gendered experiences.

Ideally, as in the case of Júlia Laki, the student takes both classes, thereby becoming familiar both with the issues related to interviewing and with the problems of gendered memory. Where this is not the case, a short introduction is needed on both topics.

Using this collection for teaching these types of graduate courses poses particular challenges.

First, the VHA is very different in scale and conceptualization from the Fortunoff collection, the other major oral history archive of the Holocaust.

The latter collection is not researchable online and fewer of the interviews were undertaken by professional interviewers. Furthermore, there were no strict interview guidelines. I partly agree with the criticism formulated by Anette Wieworka, who made the VHA collection responsible for the "Americanization of the Holocaust."² An often-voiced criticism by students is that the flow of the stories is always navigated by the interviewer, with the pre-set interview questions pointing towards a happy ending. This is partly true for the interviews conducted in the US. However, it does not apply to stories recorded in Europe and especially in Eastern Europe. In the American context interviewees are surrounded, in the closing section of the interview, by their family members, sometimes even by their neighbors. This is definitely not the case in the interviews recorded in Hungary, for example. The criticism can be used to analyze differences related to processing the memory of the Holocaust and the construction of collective memory in various contexts. As most of my students come from Eastern Europe, these interviews are an opportunity to think through the construction of the memory of the Holocaust. The politics of collecting stories should also be discussed, using the example of other online collections with video testimonies.

The second challenge for teachers is how to handle this massive collection of interviews, which offers a myriad of different individual "authentic" witness stories about survival. Jan Assmann's concepts about communicative and cultural memory can be addressed in the class in this context. Each interview is a case of individuality and authenticity.³ Every life story is a "living portraiture" to use the term Dori Laub coined for the Fortunoff collection.⁴ The fact that the stories give a human face to the experiences makes this collection a very effective teaching tool, but also a problematic one. The individual stories are performed as "true" stories validated, as they are, by their internal and external authenticity. The temptation is great to summarize and describe what has been said, instead of analyzing the stories as far as the content is concerned. This is a very real temptation, as the stories are interesting, cover aspects of the Holocaust experience that have not been discussed before, and students see the real person who is telling the story; hence they are led to think that it must be a "true" story (covering only the factual information or plot), ignoring other possible departure points for analysis such as narrative frames or modes of silencing. However, this is a great chance to address the dilemma of the interactionalism of interviewing versus the essentialized descriptive concept of the "eyewitness account." These interviews make students attentive to the possibility of bias. They

2 *Ibid.* p.117.

3 Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," *An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook, Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung 8/Media and Cultural Memory 8*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning in collaboration with Sara B. Young, (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 2008), pp. 109-119

4 <http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/about/history.html>

learn how elements are omitted for the sake of unity in the narrative. Paul Frosh pointed out “the significance of witnessing for contemporary conjunctions between personal experience, shareable knowledge, and public representation.”⁵ He also claimed that “mass media witnessing is routinized and depersonalized in a way that is morally enabling because it maintains a ground of ‘indifferent’ civil equivalence among strangers.”⁶ That is a challenge for the VHA collection. When one listens to several interviews selected by the same search item or watches the films edited with the IWitness program on a particular topic, the Holocaust stories become routinized and depersonalized through individuality and particularization. The “living portraiture” as a genre can be a double-edged advantage.

The third challenge relates to the fact that the interviews were conducted more than ten years ago. The topic of sexuality tended to be avoided and the interviewers were not prepared to ask questions about sensitive topics. My students taking the class are very much interested in historicizing sexuality. One of the courses focuses on gender-based violence. The first problem encountered when using these interviews in teaching is a technical one: it concerns indexing and segmentation. Sexual violence, assault and other key terms are not first level terms, and very often the relevant narration starts earlier than indicated in the catalog. The second problem is the issue of silencing and controlling. The interviewers are often insensitive to experiences of sexual violence, and their follow-up questions silence the interviewee. Examples of such practices can be used in the class to illustrate how difficult it is to be inclusive during the interview process and also to identify the factors influencing what is memorialized and what is forgotten. The collection consists of very few interviews with homosexual victims of the Holocaust, and nearly all these interviews can be used to illustrate uneasiness with the topic of sexuality on the part of both interviewer and interviewee. In this instance this leads to different forms of forgetting as well as omissions during the interview process.

The last challenge relates to the fact that the interviews are viewed on a computer screen and in some cases students themselves edited a film on the IWitness website based on the testimonies. Viewing the films is more powerful than reading testimonies, and the trauma is transferable causing secondary traumatization. In the interviews the camera represents the logic of impersonality, as it frames all 52,000 interviews in the same way. However, the camera is us, our gaze, and that fixed and standardized frame causes frustration and emotional fatigue, especially for this generation of students for whom violence easily becomes a spectacle. As Hartman pointed out: “The hyperreality of the image in contemporary modes of cultural production not only makes critical thinking more difficult but at once incites and

5 Paul Frosh, “Telling Presences: Witnessing, Mass Media and the Imagined Lives of Strangers,” in *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication*, ed. P. Frosh (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 51.

6 *Ibid.*

nullifies a healthy illusion: that reality could be an object of desire rather than of an aversion to overcome."⁷ I can very clearly recall the despair of one of my students who spent hours watching testimonies about sexual assault in the camps, sharing with me her frustration that she could not do anything for those who suffered but watch their stories. Maybe that is the first step towards a "historiographical revolution."

7 Geoffrey Hartman, "Memory.com: Tele-Suffering and Testimony in the Dot Com Era," *Raritan* 3 (2000), p. 18.